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ABSTRACT

While a child's eligibility to enter kindergarten is usually based on chronological age, public schools are increasingly concerned about children who appear not ready for a regular kindergarten program. Alternative programs, often termed "developmental" kindergartens, have developed rapidly over the past few years, largely under local school district initiative, and serve children without definition or regulation by state departments of education. The aims of this study were to (1) examine developmental kindergarten programs in Michigan to determine the availability, characteristics, and operation of programs; and (2) formulate policy issues. Current practice in 170 school districts with developmental kindergartens reflects diversity in many areas of program operation and raises important policy issues. A single screening test administered 3 to 5 months prior to scheduled school entry was typically used to select children. School readiness was determined by commercial tests, locally derived instruments, and combination tests. Developmental kindergarten programs tended to supplement regular kindergarten, as children are enrolled in regular kindergarten after a year of developmental experience. Teacher expectations for children in regular kindergarten and developmental kindergarten differ markedly and may serve to escalate school concerns that increasing numbers of children entering school are not ready for the regular kindergarten curriculum. (RH)

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KINDERGARTEN ALTERNATIVES FOR THE CHILD WHO IS "NOT READY": PROGRAMS AND POLICY ISSUES

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Public law tends to base a child's eligibility to enter kindergarten on the single criterion of chronological age. Public schools are increasingly concerned, however, about children who are eligible by age to enter kindergarten but who appear "not ready" for a regular kindergarten program. Alternative kindergarten programs for children who are judged to be immature or lacking in school readiness skills have developed rapidly over the past few years. Such kindergarten programs, often termed "developmental" or "readiness" kindergarten programs, have largely developed under local school district initiative and serve kindergarten age children outside the regular kindergarten program. State departments of education do not tend to define or regulate the programs as distinct and different from regular kindergarten. The intent of this study was to examine "developmental" kindergarten programs in Michigan to determine the availability, characteristics and operation of the programs and formulate policy issues for consideration.

Public school districts in Michigan were surveyed at the close of the 1984-85 school year, and information was received from 170 school districts which offered a developmental kindergarten. The reporting school districts represent nearly one-third of school districts in Michigan, suggesting broad acceptance of programs.

I. CHARACTERISTICS AND OPERATION OF DEVELOPMENTAL KINDERGARTEN PROGRAMS

The majority (79%) of school districts identified children who are "not ready" for the regular kindergarten program on the basis of a single screening test. Children were screened for kindergarten readiness and those identified "not ready" were selected (with parent permission) for the developmental kindergarten program. Only 16% of the school districts characterized their selection process as a two-step procedure in which children were screened for readiness, those identified as "not ready" were given additional testing, and selection decisions were based on both screening and testing information.

Because screening typically extended beyond a single month, responses were compiled by month in which screening was reported to begin. Screening was initiated in April or earlier in 46% of the school districts. Screening began in May for another 45% of the districts, and by June screening for fall programs had begun in 96% of all districts with developmental kindergarten programs.

Districts reported diversity in staff used for screening, and nearly all districts used at least two different types of staff. (Districts may be represented more than once in the percentages which follow.) Staff most frequently used for screening were kindergarten teachers (78% of districts) and/or special education staff (43 of districts). Also used were supervisory/administrative staff (29% of districts), elementary teachers other than kindergarten teachers (25% of districts) and/or support staff such as gym, music and art teachers (22% of districts). Other persons involved in screening included reading clinicians, teacher aides and parent volunteers, Chapter 1 teachers, readiness kindergarten teachers and/or preschool teachers.

School districts reported use of a wide variety of screening instruments to determine school readiness: commercially available tests and inventories, locally derived instruments, and "hybrid" tests, i.e., combinations of subtests from two or more instruments. The most frequently used screening instrument was the Gesell, used by 30% of the districts. Nonstandardized screening instruments, i.e., locally derived and/or "hybrid" tests, were used by 27% of the districts. Other popular instruments were the ABC, Brigance, DIAL and Developmental Tasks for Kindergarten Readiness, each used by 11% or less of the districts.

Children enrolled in developmental kindergarten typically attend regular kindergarten during the following school year. In the great majority of programs (89%), children were routinely enrolled in a regular kindergarten program after their developmental kindergarten year. Only 6% of districts indicate that children were tested at the end of the developmental kindergarten program and placement made in regular kindergarten or first grade, depending on testing results.

Developmental kindergarten programs are popularly offered as alternatives to the regular kindergarten program. However, current practice suggests that rather than providing an alternatives to kindergarten, the programs can be conceptualized as offering either a pre-kindergarten program for 5-year-olds or an extra year of kindergarten which supplements the regular kindergarten program. Developmental kindergarten programs delay entry into the regular school program by one year and add an extra year to the regular school curriculum sequence.

II. TEACHER RATINGS OF ACTIVITIES AND STUDENTS IN TWO PROGRAMS: DEVELOPMENTAL KINDERGARTEN AND REGULAR KINDERGARTEN.

A total of 213 teachers who teach developmental kindergarten in the reporting districts rated 27 selected learning activities in terms of their importance for children who attend regular kindergarten and children who attend

developmental kindergarten. Teachers also rated the extent to which eight selected social behaviors were typical of children in regular and developmental kindergarten programs at the time children entered school in the fall.

Importance of selected learning activities

Developmental kindergarten teachers rated 18 of the 27 listed learning activities as "very important" (ratings of 3.6 or higher on a five point scale) for developmental kindergarten children. Learning activities which were judged to be very important for developmental kindergarten children were traditional kindergarten activities:

block building
house/role playing activities
sand/water play
wood working
painting and drawing
cooking activities
science center activities
listening center activities
table toys (e.g., leggo, puzzles, peg boards)
simple games (e.g., board games, concentration)
singing and rhythm activities
teacher directed instruction with small groups
teaching reading to children
children looking at/reading books
large muscle activities (e.g., gallop, skip)
fine motor activities (e.g., cut, paste)
counting
comparing objects and numbers

Learning activities which were rated very important for children in regular kindergarten programs included 24 of the 27 listed activities and extended beyond traditional kindergarten activities to also include more academically focused activities:

block building
house/role play activities
painting and drawing
cooking activities
science center activities
listening center activities
table toys (e.g., leggo, puzzles, peg boards)
simple games (e.g., board games, concentration)
singing and rhythm activities
teacher directed instruction with small groups
teacher reading to children
children looking at/reading books
large muscle activities (e.g., gallop, skip)
fine motor activities (e.g., cut, paste)
paper and pencil activities (e.g., tracing, dot-to-dot, writing letters)

printing first and last name
printing simple words
identify upper case letters
identify lower case letters
matching sounds to letters
counting
comparing objects and numbers
playing number games
measuring activities

Learning activities rated as "moderately important" (ratings of 2.6 to 3.5 on a five point scale) for children in developmental kindergarten programs were:

paper and pencil activities (e.g., tracing, dot-to-dot, writing letters)
printing first and last name
printing simple words
playing number games
measuring activities

Moderately important learning activities for children in regular kindergarten programs were judged to be:

sand/water play
wood working
computer activities

Learning activities which were judged to be "not very important" (ratings of 2.5 or lower on a five point scale) for children enrolled in developmental kindergarten programs were:

identify upper case letters
identify lower case letters
matching sounds to letters
computer activities

None of the 27 listed learning activities were judged to be not very important for children enrolled in regular kindergarten programs.

Social behavior of children at time of entry into school

Teachers were asked to judge the extent to which children in developmental kindergarten and regular kindergarten programs exhibited eight social behaviors when they entered school in the fall.

Children enrolled in regular kindergarten were judged by developmental kindergarten teachers to be socially mature when they entered school in the fall. Developmental kindergarten teachers rated all eight social behaviors as "almost always" (ratings of 3.6 and above on a five point scale) exhibited by regular kindergarten children at the time they entered school in

the fall. Children enrolled in regular kindergarten were perceived to be children who:

can adapt to new situations
share and take turns
use self-control
interact appropriately with peers
use adults as resource people
listen attentively
follow directions
contribute to discussions

In contrast, children enrolled in developmental kindergarten programs were judged by developmental kindergarten teachers to be socially immature. Of the eight listed behaviors, none were judged to be almost always exhibited by developmental kindergarten children at the time they entered school in the fall. Developmental kindergarten children were perceived "sometimes" (ratings of 2.6 to 3.5 on a five point scale) able to:

adapt to new situations
interact appropriately with peers
use adults as resource people
contribute to discussions

Developmental kindergarten children were characterized as "almost never" (ratings of 2.5 or lower on a five point scale) exhibiting the ability to:

share and take turns
use self-control
listen attentively
follow directions

III. DISCUSSION

Developmental kindergarten programs have developed under local initiative as alternatives to kindergarten for children who are judged to lack school readiness. Rather than provide an alternative to kindergarten, however, the programs supplement regular kindergarten by providing a pre-kindergarten experience for 5-year-olds. But the programs operate almost exclusively outside policy set for either preschool or kindergarten programs. Current practice in the operation of developmental kindergartens raises important policy issues regarding screening, selection of children, and subsequent grade placement of participating children. Inappropriate screening practices are used to identify children who are "not ready" for kindergarten, with the result that entrance into the regular school program is delayed by one year. Despite an over-reliance on testing information to determine placement outside the regular kindergarten program, districts seldom use end-of-year

testing information to determine subsequent grade placement. Rather, children enrolled in developmental kindergarten programs are typically moved through a two year kindergarten sequence in which developmental kindergarten is routinely followed by regular kindergarten.

Teacher expectations differ importantly for children enrolled in developmental kindergarten programs and in regular kindergarten programs. Teacher ratings of appropriate learning activities for children in the two programs suggest that curriculum expectations for regular kindergarten have shifted to include academically focused activities as well as traditional kindergarten learning activities. A curriculum which primarily emphasizes traditional kindergarten activities is judged to be most appropriate for those children who are identified as lacking school readiness.

Perhaps more important though, are differing teacher perceptions of children's social maturity at time of scheduled entry into school for children in developmental and regular kindergarten programs. School readiness may be closely related to perceived social maturity of children at the time of school entry. Teacher ratings of the extent to which children in developmental kindergraten and regular kindergarten are socially adept as they enter school in the fall suggest that children who are identified as "not ready" for the regular kindergarten program are those who do not already appear to be socially competent.

School readiness tends to be operationally defined by test performance by school districts who seek to identify children who are "not ready" for the regular kindergarten program. Rather than adjust the existing kindergarten program to accommodate different levels of school readiness, increasing numbers of school districts are providing an extra year of kindergarten for children who are eligible by age but judged "not ready" to attend kindergarten. But, as curriculum and behavior expectations for children in developmental kindergarten and regular kindergarten programs diverge, school concerns regarding children who are "not ready" for the regular kindergarten program are likely to escalate and increasing numbers of children entering school judged to be "not ready" for the regular kindergarten program.